UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM

ועידת התביעות
Claims Conference
Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany

Claims Conference Holocaust Survivor Memoir Collection

Access to the print and/or digital copies of memoirs in this collection is made possible by USHMM on behalf of, and with the support of, the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum respects the copyright and other intellectual property rights associated with the materials in its collection and makes good faith efforts to determine the copyright status of such materials. The Museum has a good faith belief that the materials in this collection may be made publicly available. The Museum welcomes additional information about copyright status. If you have additional information or concerns about the copyright ownership of materials in this collection, please contact the Museum's Library by phone at 202-479-9717 or by email at reference@ushmm.org.

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2024 with funding from
United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

https://archive.org/details/bib292837

MONIEK

Rena Berkow
Moniek is my
husband Moses

It was April of 1940.

Moniek was walking fast. It was getting late. In a few hours, the curfew would be on and Jews are not permitted to walk the streets of Lodz after 5:00 p.m.

It was spring and the air was fragrant with the smell of fresh grass and early blooming trees. Moniek was perspiring under the shabby woolen coat and the flannel shirt he was wearing.

Moniek was sad and depressed. He had just visited his dear friend Janek in the hospital. Janek was dying of tuberculosis. "How terrible," Moniek thought, that his friend of many years, a wonderful young man so full of life, should be dying.

Janek was fully conscious when Moniek came in. Emaciated, with red blotches on his sunken cheeks and eyes burning with fever, he still was full of caustic humor. "I know that I am going to die," he said, "but don't feel sorry for me because I know that I am going straight to heaven. In heaven, they're waiting for someone like me, a truly pure soul. Why, I haven't even managed to seduce a woman, never made love to a woman and I am already 22 years old." Moniek could barely hold back his tears, yet with great difficulty he managed to smile. "Janek, you will be just fine," Moniek said, "and enough talking about death. I am waiting impatiently for you to get well and join me and the group for beer, cards and fun."

It was wartime and there was a great shortage of doctors and nurses in the overcrowded Jewish hospital in Lodz. The stench of

vomit, excrement, and blood, combined with the strong odor of disinfectants permeated the ward in which Janek lay. With sorrow and love, Moniek embraced Janek, knowing in his heart that he would never see his friend again.

Outside the hospital, the air was warm and fragrant with the fresh smells of spring. Moniek inhaled deeply and began walking briskly toward his home several blocks away from the hospital.

After walking a few blocks, Moniek heard shouting in German. He wanted to turn back, but, before he had the chance, he was stopped by a German SS man and told to follow him. A few meters away, a group of Jews was huddled together and Moniek was pushed toward them. More and more Jews were rounded up and added to the group. The men stood silent, their faces reflecting fear and despair.

"What are they going to do to us?" Moniek thought. He was not as much afraid for himself as he was worried what would happen to his ailing elderly mother, young sisters and brother if he were killed. How would they be able to manage without him, who, at the age of 24, was the sole supporter and head of the family.

The group of Jews grew and grew until there were several hundred people. Once the quota was met, the group was told to start marching. They marched briskly for, what seemed to Moniek, endless hours, until they arrived at an old abandoned factory in the outskirts of the city.

The Jews were marched into a large courtyard and surrounded by SS men. Commands were shouted for the Jews to start running fast

in circles. The older or slower people were hit over the head with butts of rifles. Soon the courtyard was covered with wounded and dead people. And the Jews ran and ran.

Darkness fell. Suddenly, Moniek noticed several trucks full of people pulling up to the curb. The Jews were ordered to stop running.

The SS men surrounded the trucks and started to unload the people. To his great astonishment, Moniek saw that the trucks were full of priests. The priests were placed up against a wall and a group of SS men faced them with rifles drawn and aimed to shoot.

The deadly silence which had fallen was interrupted by the loud prayers of the priests. Moniek was sure that the priests would be executed, but after a few minutes, the SS men changed their mind and chased the priests into the abandoned factory.

Then the SS men turned to the Jews and commanded them to run into another factory loft. To escape the blows raining on their heads and bodies, people pushed through the narrow doors. There was panic and total mayhem.

Moniek was pushed through the door and onto the stairs. He fell. He felt himself being trampled by the others. He could not breathe. People were falling on top of him. He lost consciousness. When he came to, Moniek was dragged up the stairs by a young man. By then, the SS men opened the door into all of the lofts and Moniek found himself in a large room on the third floor.

Moniek saw rows of double berths covered with straw. Within minutes, people tried as quickly as possible to secure a berth for themselves. Some had to be shared.

Moniek was on an upper berth. He crouched there in fear, but finally was able to breathe. Next to Moniek on another upper berth was the young man who had dragged him up the stairs. The young man's name was Josef and he was a strong, husky lad, a plumber by trade. Moniek thanked him for literally saving his life, and they quickly became good friends in the nightmare they were to share for the next ~~thirty~~ THREE days.

An SS man showed up at the door and ordered the Jews to step forward one by one to the middle of the room and empty their pockets. After that was done, the prisoners returned to their berths and the door was closed. First, though, several SS men came to carry out the goods.

After a few hours, Moniek began to feel a strong urge to urinate. The door to the loft was closed, however, and there was no way for anyone to get to a latrine. The pressure on his bladder became unbearable and Moniek urinated into his pants. The warm flow of urine brought tears to Moniek's eyes. The stinging urine burned Moniek's thighs. This, he thought, was the ultimate degradation. Later, he learned that others had relieved themselves in the same way.

Moniek was hungry and thirsty. Night fell and Moniek tried to doze off. People were moaning and crying. Drifting in and out of sleep, Moniek was thinking about his family and whether they would

be able to manage without him, since he was sure that he was going to die.

The next morning, the Jews were chased down the stairs, through the narrow doors, and into the courtyard. Again, they were beaten mercilessly. Trucks pulled up to the yard and the Jews were told to load the dead and wounded people from the day before onto them.

After this chore was completed, the prisoners were permitted to go to the latrine. Enormous lines formed. People were fainting from hunger and exhaustion. They were then chased back to the loft on the third floor.

They received neither food nor drink.

Moniek tried to pray. As a talmudic scholar, he knew the Torah almost by heart. Moniek repeated passages from it and tried not to think about his gnawing hunger and thirst.

Moniek's friend Josef was sick. He vomited and was moaning in pain. Moniek tried to clam him, but he, too, was feeling at the end of his strength.

Night fell again. The stench in the room was unbearable. People were dying, especially the ones who earlier had been wounded from the beatings by the SS men. Not a single SS man came to the loft to remove the dead and wounded. Moniek felt in his heart that he, too, would die.

The next morning, on day three, the moaning from the berth next to Moniek stopped. Josef, the strong and healthy young man, was dead.

At midday, a group of prisoners from a different loft brought in a large cauldron of water and some bread. Everyone received a cupful of water and a tiny piece of bread. As this was the first food and water in three days, the prisoners were almost too weak to move.

The tiny piece of bread only intensified Moniek's hunger. He was drifting in and out of sleep and was hallucinating, seeing loaves of bread, pitchers of water, and large roasts. Through the haze and semi-consciousness, Moniek heard his name being called again and again. When he looked up, he saw an SS man standing at the door. "Oh," he thought, "this is it, this is the end." Moniek pulled himself up and dragged his tired, sick body to the door.

"What is wrong with you, you dirty Jew, don't you want to leave here?" said the SS man. "This is just like a place you all live in, but I have an order to let you go," he stated. Moniek could not believe his ears. Was this another one of his hallucinations? It wasn't, and the SS man pushed Moniek down the stairs. Moniek fell, he got up on all four, and then started to creep toward the gate. Finally, with the rest of his strength, he began to run.

Another of the SS men watched this scene and with great amusement, sent his German shepherd dog after Moniek. The dog quickly caught up with Moniek and sank his teeth into Moniek's heavy coat, ripping out a chunk of the material without actually biting Moniek. The SS man then called his dog back and Moniek continued running.

Moniek was frightened that he would be caught again since he was running home after curfew. But, he finally reached home exhausted and barely alive. One of Moniek's sisters had learned where ~~Moniek~~ he was imprisoned and the family paid for his release with their last zlotys. They were all waiting for him when he arrived home.

And this was only the beginning.